

MY LIFE AT SEA (PART 2)

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Author: **Ron Pereira**

Although I spent only 5 years at sea, between April 1962 and March 1967, it was eventful; as the only navigational aids carried on board the cargo ships in those days were the magnetic compass, gyro compass and sextant. The only means of communication was the wireless telegraph; weather reports were difficult to obtain.

After serving four years as an poverty-stricken apprentice engineer in the Singapore Harbour Board Dockyard Department, I obtained Part A of the MOT 2nd Class Certificate of Competency in March 1962 and joined Straits Steamship as 3rd engineer on board "Kinabalu", a 12- year old Motorship propelled by a "Polar" 2-stroke diesel engine. 10 days into the trip to North Borneo (now called Sabah) the engine driven hydraulic coupling for the scavenge pump ruptured and the vessel was immobilised, but safely anchored off Semporna, located at the north-east corner of North Borneo, between Tawau and Sandakan.

The Superintendent Engineer took 2 days to arrive on board. During this period, we dismantled the damaged hydraulic coupling and cleaned the casing to prepare for repairs. After consultation with the Singapore head office, it was decided to carry out temporary repairs to enable the vessel to return to Singapore at slow speed, for permanent repairs. Temporary repairs entailed the fitting of a fabricated stub shaft in way of the hydraulic drum so that the scavenge pump could be driven by the main engine. The 16-bolt flanges at both ends of the stub shaft were then connected with loosely fitting bolts to give the stub shaft some degree of flexibility; which allowed the engine to be started and operated at half speed. During engine trials, it was found that during the starting process about 4 bolts of the 32 bolts would be fractured. It was therefore decided to carry lots of spare bolts on board and replace the top cover of the coupling casing with a canvas sheet cover, so that inspections could be readily carried out during engine operation.

After about two weeks of repair work and preparation, we commenced on the return voyage to Singapore at a speed of about 4 knots, with a small coastal vessel acting as escort. The return voyage to Singapore along the North Borneo coast and across the South China Sea in good weather conditions took about 2 weeks, but we had to stop on numerous occasions in order to replace the coupling bolts that had fractured after a period of operation. The bolt failure was closely monitored by the engineer on watch

and reported to the Chief Engineer, who in consultation with the Master decided when the vessel could be safely stopped for the bolt replacement exercise.

The only scary period we experienced was when we were abreast of Horsborough Lighthouse, when the current setting towards the lighthouse pushed the vessel very close to the rocks. Fortunately, this happened during daylight hours and after a nail-biting 30 minutes, we narrowly scraped through and eventually arrived in Singapore and anchored safely at the Eastern Anchorage.

I remained on the "Kinabalu" for a further six months; the last month as permit 2nd engineer; as the 2nd engineer was hospitalised 2 days before she was due to sail. Upon return to Singapore, I was transferred to the Steamship "Katong" propelled by a triple-expansion reciprocating steam engine; but upon return to Singapore after one trip, I requested a transfer to a motor-ship; as I required sea time on a motor-ship in order to take the MOT 2nd Class Certificate of Competency (Motor). I then spent the next 16 months as 3rd engineer on board motorship "Kunak", which was propelled by a "Werkspoor" 4-stroke diesel engine. She was on cargo liner service to Sarawak and North Borneo ports; a round trip taking about 3 weeks, with 1 week in Singapore. Life then became quite routine, as we did not encounter any bad weather or experience any engine breakdowns. As the 3rd engineer, I was involved in the overhauls of the diesel generators and assisted the 2nd engineer in the classifications surveys on the main propulsion engine when they were due; besides keeping watch at sea.

In August 1964, I signed off "Kunak" for study leave, as I had sufficient sea time to sit for Part B of the MOT 2nd Class Certificate of Competency examination. With the money I had saved during the 28 months uninterrupted sea service, I was able to fly one way to Glasgow, Scotland, where I was to undergo a 3-month course at Stow Technical College; in order to prepare for the examination. By mid-November 1964, I had obtained the MOT 2nd Class Certificate of Competency (Motor). I then spent one month on holiday in my aunt's home in Slough, England and in January 1965 enrolled in a 3-month course to sit for the Part A of the MOT 1st Class Certificate of Competency at Poplar Technical College in London. I obtained the certificate in mid-March 1965 and immediately obtained a 2nd engineer's job with Blue Star Line. However, it was not until May that I was appointed as 2nd engineer on board 23-year old "Napier Star"; which was to give me 6 months of extraordinary and invaluable experience. "Napier Star" built in 1942 for the war effort was a refrigerated cargo vessel equipped with an ammonia refrigeration plant and propelled by a "Doxford" 2-stroke opposed piston diesel engine; with auxiliaries driven by Steam, supplied by 2 natural draught fire-tube boilers. As she was part of Blue Star's standby fleet, she had been laid-for 6 months and was being reactivated for charter to transport frozen mutton from ports in Patagonia to London. I was asked to board the vessel, which was undergoing reactivation at a shipyard in East London, in order to decide whether I would take on the job of 2nd engineer. During my inspection of her engine room, I gained the impression that she would be a difficult ship; but after talking to the Scottish Chief engineer, who was already on board, and obtaining

agreement for my Singaporean colleague, Michael Lim to serve as 3rd engineer, I agreed to accept the position of 2nd engineer on board “Napier Star”.

Michael and I signed on together and immediately began assisting the Chief engineer with the reactivation work to enable “Napier Star” to commence the charter. I found out that the vessel had a compliment of 10 engineers; 4 senior engineers and 5 junior engineers working directly under the Chief engineer; with myself being in charge of the engine room and the chief refrigeration engineer in charge of the ammonia refrigeration plant. The engine room ratings were all Caucasians.

The first hurdle Michael and I had to surmount was to gain acceptance from the Caucasian engineers and engine room ratings. This took us about two weeks, whilst the vessel was still at the shipyard; to show them that we were fully capable of carrying out our duties. Once accepted, we received their full cooperation and the preparation of the vessel to depart from the shipyard became a lot easier. We eventually sailed from the shipyard in late-May 1965 and headed for Canary Islands, off the African coast, to take on bunkers. As the vessel had been laid-up for six months before reactivation, there were numerous leakages in the steam lines; which we marked for rectification. Subsequently, after departing from the Canary Islands and heading westwards across the Atlantic Ocean to Montevideo for bunkers and stores, we carried out planned stoppages at sea during daylight hours, in order to rectify the leakages. We had three stoppages altogether during a two-week crossing of the South Atlantic Ocean. We kept 2-handed watches and gradually rectified the numerous problems which had arisen from the lengthy lay-up period.

I experienced a scary period during the early-morning watch when the vessel was nearing the South American coast. During that watch, I encountered difficulties in keeping the main engine jacket water temperature steady and had to continuously adjust the jacket water cooler valves, in order to adjust the jacket water temperature. In the meantime, the junior engineer was engaged in his routine duty of pumping out the engine room and shaft tunnel bilges. I noticed him darting into and out of the shaft tunnel several times, but did not talk to him, as I was busy trying to stabilise the main engine jacket temperature. When I had successfully done so after about two hours, I saw him come out of the shaft tunnel with a troubled look. I then asked him what was wrong and he informed me that he could not pump out the shaft tunnel bilge, which was rising rapidly. He informed me that the bilge suction valve had jammed in the open position, but he could not remove the valve cover because he could not undo one cover nut due to lack of space to insert a spanner, in order to undo the nut. I noticed that 3 of the 4 cover bolts had already been removed. The tunnel was flooded to a level above the walk-way, but the bilge valve was still above water level; the water coming from the stern gland, which had been leaking continuously since we left the Canary Islands. I rushed back to the tool store and got hold of a chisel and hammer and sitting on the floor plate beside the bilge valve started to split the nut that which was preventing the removal of the valve cover. It was a very slow process, as I could only hit the chisel head by holding the hammerhead and striking it over a distance of about 2 inches. Finally,

after 10 long minutes and the water level reaching up to my chest, the nut was split and the valve cover removed. The jammed valve was then prised off the valve-seat and both components were found free of damage. The valve was then re-seated and the cover re-secured with 4 new bolts and nuts. We were then able to pump out the tunnel bilge water in a nick of time.

Upon anchoring at Montevideo for bunkers and stores, we had a well-earned night ashore and then sailed the next day for 2 ports in Patagonia, to load the frozen mutton cargo. During the next few days, the cargo holds were cooled down by the ammonia refrigeration plant and we experienced numerous ammonia leakages, which were rather unpleasant; but by the time we anchored at Santa Cruz, the cargo holds were ready to receive the frozen mutton cargo. Subsequently, loading of the cargo at Rio Grande, located at the northern coast of Terra Del Fuego was very difficult; as the day temperatures of 4°F plummeted to 12°F at night and the engineers had to constantly go out onto the cold deck to rectify problems on the steam winches and when the cargo loading was stopped, the steam winches had to be kept slowly idling over to prevent the steam lines from freezing up. Finally, after some hard work in extremely cold conditions, the 4000 tonnes of frozen mutton was loaded and the vessel was able to head back northwards towards Montevideo; to take on bunkers and stores for the final leg of the voyage across the South Atlantic Ocean to London. We arrived at the entrance to the River Plate on a dark and stormy evening in mid-July 1965. I had just come off the 4 to 8 watch and was having a drink with the Chief engineer and chief refrigeration engineer, when we felt heavy bumping, which increased in intensity. The Chief engineer and I ran down into the engine room and discovered that the main engine had been stopped, and the vessel was listing significantly to Port. The sounding of the double-bottom tanks was commenced immediately and we found that all the fuel tanks had been breached and the previously empty ballast tanks were filling up. 2 senior engineers stood by the main engine in order to operate it as requested by the Bridge, whilst the Chief engineer and I supervised the sounding of the double-bottom tanks and maintained operation of the boilers, electrical generator and pumps; in order to maintain all the services on board the vessel. It was too dark on deck to know where we were aground.

After a long sleepless night, we discovered at daylight that the vessel was firmly aground with her portside parallel to and about 50 metres away from the beach, with her bow facing the open sea. The vessel was firmly aground and listing about 25° to Port. Over the next few days, the junior engineers kept watches, in order to ensure that the boilers were kept operating, so that the ammonia refrigeration plant and the electrical supply and ship services could be maintained in operation. The boiler fuel oil tank had to be drained frequently in order to remove water which had separated from the fuel oil pumped from the double-bottom fuel tanks and had settled at the bottom of the tank. The senior engineers carried out inspections to evaluate the full extent of visible damage that had been sustained during the grounding incident and dealt with the problems as they arose. On the third day after the grounding, the Blue Star Line superintendents, Salvage Association surveyor and the Salvors arrived on board and the

chief engineer and I were then engaged in the inspections conducted by them and the discussions to re-float the vessel. The salvage team discovered that a sand mound was building up on the starboard side of the vessel and decided that 2 sea-anchors would be rigged and attached to the wire drums of the starboard cargo winches at no.1 and no.2 cargo holds and a towline from the anchor windlass would be attached to the salvage tug lying in the deep water ahead of the vessel. We were told to prepare the main engine for operation, as the engine power would also be required for the re-floating operation. We were informed that the re-floating operation would be mounted during the highest tide period, which was about 30 days away in mid-August 1965. We then carried out maintenance work on the main engine and laid out cooling water hoses to all the plummer blocks in the shaft tunnel, as we anticipated that the tunnel shafting had been misaligned by the grounding of the vessel and the plummer block bearings would run hot during the re-floating operations.

The re-floating day finally arrived and when requested, we operated the main engine at full speed. For the first few minutes, the main engine strained and suddenly we felt that the vessel was moving and the telegraph order came to slow the main engine down. We then realised that we were afloat and the vessel was almost upright again. When we were finally towed into Montevideo, we were greeted by the blaring horns from the ships at anchor; however our work was not over; the ammonia refrigeration plant and the auxiliary machinery had still to be kept in operation and the cargo winches had to be prepared, in order to discharge the cargo of frozen mutton. In the meantime, potential buyers came on board to inspect the frozen mutton cargo, in order to prepare their bids. The cargo was sold within the first week of our arrival at Montevideo and then discharged over-side to the buyers' cargo lighters. We then shut down the ammonia refrigeration plant and began preparing the vessel for dry-docking; in order to inspect the bottom damage sustained during the grounding incident and re-floating operation. When the vessel was safely dry-docked, we discovered that the bottom damage extended from the stem of the vessel to the stern; the bottom hull was heavily indented and heavily corrugated at numerous locations; most importantly, the stern frame was fractured. The extensive damage sustained in way of the bottom hull meant that the "Napier Star" was a constructional total loss and this was subsequently confirmed by the attending surveyor from Salvage Association. We were then informed that she would be sold for scrap. However, there was to be one more dramatic incident before I could say goodbye to the "Napier Star". On the day after the bottom inspection, we were preparing for the undocking of the vessel, when a fire occurred in the starboard boiler room; whilst all the engineers were in the mess room having lunch. The fireman-on-watch came out of the engine room to raise the alarm. I followed the Chief engineer down into the engine room together with all the engineers. Running down towards the starboard boiler room, the chief engineer closed the boiler fuel tank supply valve to the starboard boiler and instructed me to start up the sea water pump. The 3rd and 4th engineers were instructed to grab the foam extinguishers and take them to the starboard boiler room. When I passed the starboard boiler room, I noted with horror that the flames were right up to the top of the boiler room. However, I carried on with

what I had to do and when I returned after 5 minutes, after starting up the sea water pump, I found to my relief that the fire had been extinguished. I was then told to use the fire hoses to cool down the hot steel surfaces. I was later told that the chief engineer had guided the 3rd and 4th engineers to aim the foam jets at the far end of the starboard boiler room and slowly bring the foam layer across the boiler room towards their location; this enveloped the flames and put out the fire. I then realised how important it was to serve with an experienced chief engineer and thanked my lucky stars that he was there to direct the fire fighting operations.

The “Napier Star” was finally sold for scrap and I was signed off to return to London in mid-November 1965. The grounding saga had set back my wedding, which had been planned for September 1965 in London; so I belatedly married Rita Au Yong on a cold wintry day on 11th December 1965.

In early-January 1966, I signed on as 2nd engineer on board ‘Santos Star’, a refrigerated motorship based in Genoa, Italy and on cargo liner service between Mediterranean ports and Buenos Aires, Argentina. She was about six years old and propelled by a MAN 2-stroke diesel engine; equipped with diesel engine driven alternators and a freon refrigeration plant for cooling the refrigerated cargo holds. The first 2-months round-trip to Buenos Aires was uneventful; except for misbehaviour of some of the engineers and crew, when the vessel called at the Canary Islands for bunkers (outward bound) and when the vessel commenced loading frozen meat cargo at Buenos Aires. At the Canary Islands, several of the Caucasian engineers and crew went ashore and got drunk on duty-free alcohol; in Buenos Aires, several Caucasian engine room ratings went ashore to the cantina during the first morning tea-break and did not return for duty until sailing time, 3 days later. Engineer and engine room ratings behaviour during the second trip was much better, but upon return to the Mediterranean, the fully loaded vessel was hit by a severe Cyclone in the Gulf of Lyons. It happened suddenly during my watch at five o'clock in the morning and as some partially filled oil drums had not been lashed down, we experienced scary moments, when the drums were buffeted around the engine room during the peak of the storm, when the vessel pitched and rolled heavily. Fortunately, no casualties or damage to machinery occurred, but it taught me an important lesson; that all loose objects in the engine room had to be lashed down before the commencement of any voyage, as stormy weather was unpredictable, especially during the hours of darkness.

Upon our arrival at Genoa, I signed off the vessel and returned to London. My wife Rita, who met me at Gatwick Airport, said that she would like to return to Singapore, as life was lonely in London without me around; so on the next day, I went down to the shipping offices in Threadneedle Street in London and secured a job as a 3rd engineer with Indochina Steam Navigation, whose fleet of motor cargo ships operated out of Hong Kong. I was subsequently given notice to join the “Eastern Ranger” in Singapore in about 3 weeks time. I therefore immediately made arrangements for Rita and I to fly back to Singapore as soon as we possibly could. The “Eastern Ranger” was an 8-year old motor cargo vessel propelled by a Doxford opposed piston diesel engine and she was on

a cargo liner run between Calcutta, India and ports in Japan; calling eastbound at Chittagong, Chalna, Rangoon, Penang, Port Klang, Singapore, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Yokohama and calling westbound at Osaka, Kobe, Hong Kong, Singapore, Port Klang, Penang, Rangoon and Calcutta. Our accommodation was air-conditioned and this was the first time I was sailing on a ship having such comfort during off-duty hours. The 3 round-trips I made as 3rd engineer between mid-June 1966 and mid-March 1967 were uneventful; except for encountering 2 typhoons in the China sea. However, I was somewhat alarmed by the heavy drinking that went on aboard ship, amongst the deck officers and engineer officers. I found that I was also drinking more than I usually did and decided that I would request for no-pay study leave as soon as I had completed the remaining 9 months required to sit for Part B of the MOT 1st Class Certificate of Competency.

I was granted permission to sign off the vessel when she called at Singapore in mid-March 1967. My sea career effectively ended when I signed off the “Eastern Ranger”; although I obtained the 1st Class Certificate of Competency (Motor) in late-June 1967. I then decided to seek a land-based job in Singapore. However, I must say that I gained very valuable experience during my period at sea and this subsequently served me well during my land-based career ashore in Singapore, as a non-exclusive marine surveyor and marine consultant from July 1967 to December 2010.

Recorded for Posterity by Ron Pereira in May 2012